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AMERICA'S DIPLOMATIC CHARADE

by Roy Gutman

American policy toward Nicaragua seems near the point of no return. The Reagan administration now faces the choice of either abandoning its ambitious aims or achieving them at the points of U.S. bayonets. How Washington reached this position is a story of ill-formed strategy, debilitating bureaucratic struggles, and subordination of diplomacy to military pressure.

President Ronald Reagan contends that he has tried to settle the Central America crisis peacefully and points in particular to August 1981, when then Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Enders spent 2 days in "open and frank" discussions with Sandinista leaders in the Nicaraguan capital of Managua. Some papers were later exchanged, but the talks broke off in late October. The administration says Nicaragua failed to respond substantively to American concerns.

But interviews with leading U.S. policy-makers and Sandinista officials reveal that the United States itself helped scuttle the talks. Nicaragua failed to respond, but the United States never laid its complete set of demands on the table. A draft of the U.S. demands on some of the most critical security issues was prepared. But its sweeping terms included the humiliating requirement that Nicaragua return its heavy arms to Cuba, the Soviet Union, and other countries of origin. Moreover, shortly after being shown to former Nicaraguan Ambassador to the United States Arturo José Cruz, who came to the United States in December 1981, it was withdrawn to a classified safe in the State Department. There it remains—never presented, never discussed.

"I was flabbergasted by the demands," Cruz

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